

Isaiah's Book of Consolation (Isaiah 40-55)
(1) The Promise of God's Comfort through the Coming of God (Isa. 40:1-11)

Outline of Isaiah 40-66

SECTION THREE: ORACLES OF REDEMPTION AND CONSUMMATION

- I. The Book of the Consolation of Israel (Chs. 40-55)
 - A. 40:1-11 The Prophet is to Announce God's Coming

Today we begin a series on what has been described as Isaiah's "Book of Consolation", which is the description of the message of Isaiah 40-55. It is good that we take some time and examine God's Word in the Old Testament, and this for several reasons. First, it is not commonly done because, understandably, the New Testament is the focus of most Christians. We would prefer to read of the realization of God's promises to the promises prior to fulfilment. Second, the Old Testament is not often presented because of evangelical perception and understanding, which I would argue is misconception and misunderstanding, that the Old Testament is not Christian Scripture, but rather the Old Testament is Scripture for the nation of Israel, for the Jewish people, not Christian people. Third, there is commonly a disinterest or even aversion to wrestle with historical narrative and poetic literature, of which the Old Testament abounds. And fourth, I suspect that there is an avoidance of the Old Testament because of the difficulty and perhaps difference of opinion about how to best interpret the Old Testament in the light of the revelation of God in the New Testament.

But it should be our desire and our delight to study the Old Testament and understand its message, for this is the inerrant and authoritative Word of God, which He has deposited to us for our benefit and our advantage. It was the Old Testament Scriptures that the Apostle commended to young Timothy as the source of all help and instruction for the Christian life. Of the Old Testament Paul wrote:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16f)

Now we might ask, "Why Isaiah 40? Why not begin with Isaiah 1?" I had considered doing so. I have taught through the entire prophecy of Isaiah twice over the years. But perhaps due to this experience is why we decided to begin with Isaiah 40. In some ways the themes of the content of Isaiah 1 through 39 is quite different from that of Isaiah 40 through 66. The first 39 chapters contain largely oracles of God's coming judgment upon sinful Israel and Judah. It records the defection of God's people from their covenant obligations before God and the resultant judgment of God that He brought upon them. Isaiah recorded prophecies of God's destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria. He conveyed prophecies of God's desolation of the southern kingdom of Judah by Babylon. Oracle after oracle in the first 39 chapters present ominous declarations of God's judgment, of Israel's loss and defeat. Oh yes, there are here and there some glorious words of God's purpose to bring salvation to His people through the coming of the Messiah's kingdom, but the major message of Isaiah 1-39 is one of God's wrath upon a rebellious people. To begin a series with Isaiah 1 would result in us being continually subjected to a message of wrath and judgment for many, many weeks, which might not be best for building up our church. But with Isaiah 40, the message of Isaiah's prophecy changes remarkably. So much so that Isaiah 40 through 55 has been called "The Book of

Consolation,” that is, it is largely a message of comfort to the people of God that God has purposed to bring His people to experience the forgiveness of sins, the restoration of their relationship with God, and the glorious future that awaits them due to that restored relationship. Oh yes, there are also messages of judgment in these chapters, but the preponderance of the message is one of promised salvation.

Isaiah 40 through 55 is also a section of Scripture that is rich with prophecy of the coming Saviour, the Promised Messiah of Israel. Isaiah presents the person and ministry of Jesus Christ so clearly and completely that Isaiah has been commonly referred to as “the Fifth Gospel.” We read of our Lord as the promised Suffering Servant, who would come and remove the curse of God from His people, the curse that fell upon them for their transgression of God’s law. Isaiah also takes us beyond our current experience of our relationship with God and reveals to us the blessing of life in our future glorified state.

I might say at the outset that my interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecies will be consistent with my understanding of an amillennial view of the promised Kingdom of God. In other words, as I understand the teaching of the Bible, the Old Testament largely foretold what we are experiencing in this church age. Most evangelical interpreters at this time in church history believe that the Bible foretells a future 1,000 year Jewish kingdom on earth, in which King Jesus will rule from a restored earthly throne in the city of Jerusalem. The understanding of the amillennialist is that Jesus Christ entered His Messianic reign upon His resurrection from the dead. Jesus Christ has been ruling from “David’s throne”, which is the very throne of God in heaven, from which King Jesus rules as King of kings and Lord of lords. Now admittedly some of the passages are difficult to interpret according to any of the commonly believed conceptions of the promised kingdom. Some passages, particularly if we continue in our study from Isaiah 56-66, ay seem to project better a premillennial understanding of the promised kingdom, but we will address those matters as we face them. When it is appropriate, however, we will consider alternative interpretations to my own, so that we might all be able to assess these matters more clearly and accurately. May our Lord help each of us in our effort to understand the truths of His Word.

Now whereas we might benefit from diving in at Isaiah 40 to begin our study because of the emphasis on the focus on the promises of God respecting salvation, the one disadvantage of doing so is that we do not come to Isaiah 40:1ff with the mindset and the anticipation of those who have been taught and conditioned by the messages of Isaiah 1-39. The degree of appreciation we might have toward the promised comfort (consolation) of God, will be directly influenced by our understanding of the hopelessness of our condition and our dependence upon God to act on our behalf according to His mercy and free grace. Isaiah 1 through 39 lays the professing people of God very low. The message of Isaiah 40ff is for the people who had undergone the terribly severe judgment of God for having broken God’s covenant with them that had been established through Moses at Mount Sinai. Because of their sin and rebellion, their breaking of their covenant relationship with God, God had ceased to regard Israel as *His* people, His covenant people. Consider this description of God’s dealings with this people, Israel, recorded in Isaiah 9:

The Lord sent a word against Jacob,
And it has fallen on Israel.

⁹All the people will know—
Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria—
Who say in pride and arrogance of heart:

¹⁰“The bricks have fallen down,
But we will rebuild with hewn stones;
The sycamores are cut down,
But we will replace them with cedars.”

¹¹Therefore the LORD shall set up
The adversaries of Rezin against him,
And spur his enemies on,

¹²The Syrians before and the Philistines behind;
And they shall devour Israel with an open mouth.

For all this His anger is not turned away,
But His hand is stretched out still.

- ¹³For the people do not turn to Him who strikes them,
Nor do they seek the LORD of hosts.
¹⁴Therefore the LORD will cut off head and tail from Israel,
Palm branch and bulrush in one day.
¹⁵The elder and honorable, he is the head;
The prophet who teaches lies, he is the tail.
¹⁶For the leaders of this people cause them to err,
And those who are led by them are destroyed.
¹⁷Therefore the Lord will have no joy in their young men,
Nor have mercy on their fatherless and widows;
For everyone is a hypocrite and an evildoer,
And every mouth speaks folly.

For all this His anger is not turned away,
But His hand is stretched out still.

- ¹⁸For wickedness burns as the fire;
It shall devour the briars and thorns,
And kindle in the thickets of the forest;
They shall mount up like rising smoke.
¹⁹Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts
The land is burned up,
And the people shall be as fuel for the fire;
No man shall spare his brother.
²⁰And he shall snatch on the right hand
And be hungry;
He shall devour on the left hand
And not be satisfied;
Every man shall eat the flesh of his own arm.
²¹Manasseh shall devour Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh;
Together they shall be against Judah.

For all this His anger is not turned away,
But His hand is stretched out still.

God had brought His judgment upon Israel. We read of His severe, but just punishment of this people who were under His wrath. This people had sinned against all of God's kindness and blessing that He had so graciously bestowed upon them. Their sin warranted His judgment, which He justly brought to pass in history. They had nothing remaining that God had not smitten or removed from them. Their land had been decimated, their cities destroyed, the people had been enslaved. They had no hope before God. They had no basis of claim to God. This God was against them and had greatly afflicted them. If this was how Israel the once great people of God stood before their holy God, what of the Gentiles who know never knew God? What hope had they? The answer of course is no hope, when they considered their condition and state before the one true God who had passed His judgment upon them. But it was to this hopeless and helpless people that the initial message of **Isaiah 40:1-11** was given:

- “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”
Says your God.
²“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD's hand
Double for all her sins."

³The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;

⁵The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶The voice said, "Cry out!"
And he said, "What shall I cry?"

"All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever."

⁹O Zion,
You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem,
You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;
Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,
And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.

¹¹He will feed His flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry them in His bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.

Here is a message of God bringing peace to His people, for He would act on their behalf. He would bring them salvation. Actually this is God's instruction to Isaiah as to the content of His message that His prophet was to announce to His people.

We read first of God's...

I. Promise of Comfort (40:1, 2)

Again we read of God's instruction to Isaiah:

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”
Says your God.
²“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD's hand
Double for all her sins.”

Here God informs Isaiah of his responsibility to bring the message of salvation to His people. But by extension, we see here the responsibility of all of the Lord's spokesmen, even unto this day, to speak words of comfort to God's people. Matthew Henry said it well:

We have here the commission and instructions given, not to this prophet only, but, with him, to all the Lord's prophets, nay, and to all Christ's ministers, to proclaim comfort to God's people. 1. This did not only warrant, but enjoin, this prophet himself to encourage the good people who lived in his own time, who could not but have very melancholy apprehensions of things when they saw Judah and Jerusalem by their daring impieties ripening apace for ruin, and God in his providence hastening ruin upon them. Let them be sure that, notwithstanding all this, God had mercy in store for them. 2. It was especially a direction to the prophets that should live in the time of captivity, when Jerusalem was in ruins; they must encourage the captives to hope for enlargement in due time. 3. Gospel ministers, being employed by the blessed Spirit as comforters, and as helpers of the joy of Christians, are here put in mind of their business.¹

These verses of Isaiah 40:1-11 may be understood as the prologue to God's announcement of His intention to bring salvation to His people. Here God announced His intention to bring salvation. In the next few chapters of Isaiah we will read that it is because God is the Creator and the Sovereign Ruler over His creation that He can bring to pass what He purposed to do for His people.

God tells Isaiah in **verse 1** to announce “comfort” to His people. The word “comfort” carries the idea of consolation, or peace, that God intended that His people would experience from His hand. It speaks of God's intention to reverse the manner in which He had dealt with them. Where before there was hostility and enmity, now there would be peace and comfort. The same word translated “comfort” is found in Isaiah 51:3: “For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”

Notice that God tells Isaiah to announce the message to “My people.” “Comfort, yes, comfort My people! says your God.” This is not a message of comfort to the world at large, to those who are estranged from Him. This is a message to His people, those who are covenant relationship with Him. Later in this Book of Consolation we will read and learn of the new covenant that God will make with His people through His Suffering Servant, foretelling, of course, of the Lord Jesus. But here the language of a covenant relationship with God is used to give assurance to this people who had suffered greatly under God's judgment.

Sadly, too many announce that God has promised His “comfort” to people who have no warrant to assume God's promises. They live in unbelief and rebellion to God. They have no basis of hope for God's “comfort” while they persist in their rebellion. God's comfort is the privilege and blessing of true believers only. They and they only may be encouraged in God's “comfort.”

In **verse 2** we read further of this message that Isaiah was to proclaim:

“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Fleming H. Revell), vol. 4, p. 211.

That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD's hand
Double for all her sins.”

God instructed Isaiah to speak to “Jerusalem”, announcing that the war was over between God and her. Here “Jerusalem” is not a reference to the historic, physical city of Jerusalem. When this message was to be announced, Jerusalem would be in ruins and the temple would have been destroyed by Babylon.² Here we see Jerusalem being an emblem for God’s elect who had survived His judgment, the ones whom God purposed to save through the coming Messiah. The term “Jerusalem” is found to be a metaphor of God’s people in numerous places in Scripture. A synonymous term would be that of “Zion”, which historically was one of the mountains on which the city was built. But over time Zion also came to be a metaphor of God’s elect. This is clearly seen in the Epistle to the Galatians³ and the book of Revelation⁴ and in Hebrews⁵. But for our purposes we may look at Revelation 3:12. Here the Lord Jesus promised,

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, *the New Jerusalem*, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.” (Rev. 3:12)

Isaiah was to declare to God’s covenant people, “*that her warfare is ended.*” God had declared war against this people for their sins. God regards all people of the world who are outside of Jesus Christ to be at war with Him and He is with them. This is reflected in Paul’s words in his epistle to the Colossians:

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.” (Col 1:21ff)

Isaiah was to declare to “Jerusalem”, God’s covenant people, “*that her iniquity is pardoned.*” “Iniquity” is the translation of the Hebrew word עֲוֹנָה (*yaohn*). *Yaohn* is translated in various ways, such as “sin”, “fault”, “iniquity”, “mischief”, “guilt,” or “punishment of iniquity.” This depicts sin as having “its roots in an evil disposition.”⁶ It suggests the evil motivation which leads to sinful acts. “For your *guilt* teaches your mouth, and you choose the language of the crafty” (Job 15:5). “They have turned back to the *iniquities* of their ancestors who refused to hear My words” (Jer. 11:10). In both of these instances, evil moved these people to act as they did. This evil principle itself is a cause of guilt and warrants the judgment of God. ““Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your *iniquity* is before Me,” declares the Lord” (Jer. 2:22).

Isaiah was to announce to God’s people His intention to bless them, “*For she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*” God has purposed to save His people, bringing them through His judgment for their sins. Isaiah will later reveal that the punishment for their sins that resulted in their salvation was through the suffering of the Righteous Servant, in which Isaiah foretells of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on behalf of His people.

² Even though we believe in the integrity of the entire book of Isaiah to be that of the 8th century prophet Isaiah, nevertheless the message of chapters 40ff was to be directed to the exiles, those who had survived God’s judgment upon the city when it and its temple was destroyed in 587 B.C.

³ Gal. 4:25f

⁴ Rev. 21 and 22.

⁵ Heb. 12:18-24

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 263.

We next read of the...

II. Preparation for Comfort (40:3-8)

In order for the consolation to come from God to His people, they would need to be prepared. Two voices are heard with view to this preparation. The first may be termed,

A. A Voice of Preparation (40:3-5)

³The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

⁵The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together;

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

For anyone somewhat familiar with the New Testament record, these words are immediately recognisable. This is a prophecy of John the Baptist whom God sent to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, the Promised Messiah, to come among His people. We read these words of Isaiah in all four of the Gospels in reference to John. Here is Luke’s account:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. ³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make His paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough ways smooth;

⁶And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

⁷Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:1-9)

We see that the needful preparation for the Lord’s people to experience the “comfort” that belongs to His people is that of *repentance*. Repentance occurs when a person comes to understand that his sins deserve God’s punishment, and that it renders him wholly dependent upon God in His mercy and grace to

extend forgiveness of sins. Repentance is turning from sin back unto God. 2 Corinthians 7:7ff describe the nature of true repentance over against that which is wrongly thought to be repentance. Paul wrote:

⁸For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. ⁹Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. ¹⁰For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. (2 Cor. 7:8-11)

Now John the Baptist was announcing that the comfort of God would come upon those through repentance, which itself was a demonstration of faith, even as they looked to the coming of the Promised King, who would usher in the Kingdom of God, and would allow entrance into His kingdom of those who believed on Him and submitted to His rule.

They were to prepare themselves for the coming King, as we read in Isaiah 40:3-5. First, let us consider this “voice”, which was John the Baptist. He was but one through whom the Word of God was communicated; he was but a “voice.” But he was also the voice of one crying *in the desert, or, the wilderness*. Again, we read in Isaiah 40:3,

“Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the *desert*
A highway for our God.

Why the wilderness, the desert? This in one way looks back to the care that God provided for His people when they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land. But as we had pointed out not too long ago, the promised salvation of New testament believers is likened unto a second exodus, in which we are traveling from our places of exile among the nations, returning on our highway of faith, the highway of the wilderness, even as our God promises to care and provide for us, securing our final arrival to our heavenly Canaan.

This is the idea in the prophecy of Jeremiah of the salvation that we enjoy in Jesus Christ. We read in Jeremiah 31:1ff these words:

“At the same time,” says the LORD, “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people.” ²Thus says the LORD:

“The people who survived the sword
Found grace *in the wilderness*—
Israel, when I went to give him rest.”

³The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying:

“Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.

⁴Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel! (Jer. 31:1-4)

And here in Isaiah 40:3ff we read a prophecy of John the Baptist announcing the preparation of a highway through the wilderness. But the highway spoken here is not so much the highway in which exiles are returning to Zion. Rather it is a highway through the wilderness, *which is preparation for the visitation of the King*. The highway requires filling in valleys and taking off the tops of hills in order to make a straight highway on which ease and rapid travel can occur. Again, Isaiah 40:3 reads,

“Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert

A highway *for our God*.

The voice is preparing the highway by preparing the people through repentance. Isaiah 40:4f read,

⁴Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;
⁵***The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,***
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

John the Baptist was preparing the people was preparing the people to receive their promised King, Jesus Christ, who would usher in the kingdom of God, bringing into its realm all those that repent of their sins and believe on Him.

What we discover in these first few verses of Isaiah’s Book of Consolation is that Isaiah is prophesying of the coming of Jesus Christ and how He will secure “consolation, or peace, or rest, for the people of God.”

For us today there is still need for preparation. For our King is returning one day, perhaps soon. He will receive unto Himself, granting entrance into His everlasting kingdom all those who have truly prepared themselves for Him through repentance from sin and faith in Him. May our Lord enable us each to continually be responsive to this call.

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen.”